Thinking Philosophically

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I am a philosopher of education by training. While well warned by my mentors of the hazards inherent to my trade, I still have been stunned by the magnitude of the loneliness engendered, at least in part, by the disrepute that my trade has acquired. It has taken me only a short time at my academic post to recognize that philosophy is not regarded favorably by many people across the university. Some simply do not have even a vague idea what philosophy is about in the first place, that is, in terms of its subject matter or in terms of the activities that make up its practice. In some academic circles (as well as within my own college of education) the very word "philosophy" itself often invites sneers and open hostility. I recently participated in an informal discussion in which academics from the social sciences were attempting to understand what George Herbert Mead meant by the socio-physiological foundations of society. I suggested that one way to understand Mead is to clarify the philosophical problems that he was trying to solve. After a collective shift and sigh, one of the sociologists in attendance reminded me that Mead was concerned with social psychology and not with philosophy. Furthermore, the sociologists continued, while every study requires a certain regard for the meaning of operational terms, it does not follow that a special group (he meant philosophers) is needed to complete the task.

The suspicion that philosophy is fraudulent extends beyond academic circles and permeates other realms of everyday life as well. While surfing with acquaintances one Wednesday morning, I was asked what I did for a living that allowed me to surf in the middle of a work week. Somewhat hesitant and reserved, I explained that I was a philosopher of education. Someone in the group then asked, "What does one do as a philosopher?" To be brief about the matter, I suggested that philosophers aim to think through problematic experiences as clearly and as thoroughly as possible. The answer that I gave, however, wasn't good enough. Someone else in the group pointed out that clear and thorough thought is part of every activity, including

surfing, and that philosophers—and the public—would be better off surfing for a living instead of wasting taxpayers' money.

While I understand that these puzzled and negative sentiments are not new to the history of philosophy, they were abstract and disembodied to me until recently. Therefore, a task is before me. If I seriously plan on being a professional philosopher, I had better find a working answer to the questions entailed in my experiences with this negative attitude toward my craft. What exactly is philosophic thinking and how is it to be distinguished from any other mode of human thinking?

In *After Virtue,* the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre defines a practice as "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that the human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended."[1] MacIntyre's notion of practice here rests upon the ontological assumption that human beings come into a world that already is structured in relations of shared meaning and purpose to be carried out. This carrying out of shared purpose is a habit—or practice—that structures human behavior with collective rules or standards for achieving goods purposively aimed for. In the practice of surfing, for instance, the perfect spiritual and physical balance between the fragile human being and the omnipotent sea stands as one of the fundamental goods to be achieved. If one is to avoid the imminent dangers lurking about the sea, however, and to begin realizing this fundamental good, he first must learn a few things: rotating his hands in a paddling motion and transferring his weight upon his board are essential techniques to planing successfully across the water; yielding the right of way to the individual engaged in the deepest part of the wave reduces physical and social tension; and respecting the moods of the indifferent sea and its creatures cultivates an organic bond necessary for spiritual elevation. In other words, the novice surfer can start to see surfing as a meaningful metaphor for further life-experience only when he assumes and transforms the shared purposes and handed-down rules that define the practice.

As a human practice similar to surfing, philosophy too has its own special purposes and goods to be achieved, its own method for achieving these goods, and its own standards of excellence. If philosophy can be seen as clear and simple thought, and since every human practice demands such thought as a necessary part of its activity, how then is the practice of philosophy to be distinguished from any other everyday human practice? In order to understand exactly what philosophical examination entails, it is necessary to work out philosophizing as an intellectual practice that is different from other everyday human practices.

In *How Philosophy Uses Its Past*, John Randall points out that "philosophy has been, and ultimately remains, a social enterprise, as well as —indeed, men being the social creatures they are, before it can become—a private and personal way of accepting the universe and coming to terms with the conditions of human life. And

as a social and cultural enterprise, philosophizing is the expression in thinking of cultural change itself."[2] In other words, human beings inherit and assume a world already set in purposeful motion. This is a world specified in detail by human beings in terms such that they can point to and carry out the shared habits necessary to sustain and expand human existence. To the extent that human beings come to cross purposes in their search to improve the common good, then human action fails to achieve its proper moral end and thus leads to a felt conflict in bringing ideas to social maturity.

If social strife is to be resolved such that the human quest for the good life may continue, then it is necessary to examine the particular conflicting ideas and the concrete social practices that animate them. This examination into the broil of human affairs constitutes the essence of philosophizing. It is the practice of clarifying the discrepant assumptions of meaning underneath social ills and simplifying these assumptions into a unified vision for resolute action toward social improvement, "the expression in thinking of cultural change itself."

Thinking clearly and simply, however, can be just as characteristic of everyday, common sense thought as it is of philosophic thought. For example, to the surfer it is advantageous to distinguish between waves rolling over voluminous amounts of water and those that are just surface ripples. Or, to the daughter wanting to stay up past her bedtime to play with a new toy, it is paramount that she tell the differences in mood of her parents. Thinking the world in terms of its separate parts, though, would be useless in these practical matters unless complemented by synthetic thought. Thus, the surfer, after picking out the proper wave, turns his attention to paddling his board in order to match the rhythm of the oncoming bulge; the daughter, recognizing her parents to be irritable, fashions her plea in a way that assures them a smooth night. In this sense, then, common sense thought can be characterized in the terms that William James employs to describe philosophic vision: the modes of feeling the whole push or drift of life and the development of the best working attitude in response.[3]

To the individual engaged in routine thought about the push and pull of everyday life, however, the purposes and rules of behavior that make up his response are taken-for-granted. and go unquestioned as long as nothing stands in the way. That is, the midwife routinely prepares the expecting mother by cultivating a confident attitude toward the birth process. Recurrent conversations about the trials of labor and hard-fought yet triumphant personal struggles serve to build a tough-minded vision within which the expectant mother sees herself as an active agent in a thriving and joyful experience. As a task of her practice, the midwife inspires and coaches the mother through painful contractions, calming and exciting when necessary with the store of advice stocked up from her years of baby care. When the time comes, and out of habit, the midwife massages the newborn out of the birth canal and thus mediates between the dark of non-existence and the light of life. But, the nature of non-existence and existence, and everything else that makes up human reality, are not questioned by the midwife intent on meeting the immediate demands of her work. Although important to her throughout her practice, her simple and clear

thought purposely aims at bringing about the good of healthy human life and nothing else. The longer she practices her trade, however, the more likely she will experience still-birth or fatal labor complications even though she has acted upon the wisest common sense thought defining her practice. The experience of death not only brings about sorrow, suspicion, fear, and blame but can paralyze the midwife such that she cannot continue carrying out the shared purposes of her practice. There is a felt discrepancy between the shared meanings, purposes, and goods that she has assumed and the harsh new experience that does not square with her stock of meaning. To put it simply, her future as a practicing midwife becomes problematic.

To continue improving her craft and extending care for her community requires that the midwife come to terms with this new experience within the framework of meaning by which she understands her practice. At this point her problem is a philosophical problem, and the process of her coming to terms with this experience is the act of philosophizing itself. In other words, "coming to terms" here refers to the reflective focus on her assumptions of shared meaning that define the purposes, methods, and goods of midwifery. This focus entails the analysis of assumed meaning into its related parts such that how these parts interact to bear upon this troubling experience becomes clear. Furthermore, "coming to terms" suggests a reworking of the shared meanings that frame the midwife's best working attitude (right down to her notions about human existence and reality) in a way that allows her to synthesize this once complicated and blurred experience into a more simple and enlightened horizon for action. In a sense, then, philosophizing demands a certain plastic power of human thought that Friedrich Nietzsche suggests is demanded of the strong individual making his way in the everyday world: "the capacity to develop out of oneself in one's own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken moulds."[4] Therefore, philosophizing takes its cue from the fervent turmoil of everyday human practice and, from such cue, is the practice of thinking about all human practice, including itself.

In general, philosophizing is the use of disciplined thought, spurred by unsettlement, intent upon providing wisdom about experience. Put in terms of MacIntyre's notion of practice, philosophy ultimately aims at a more thorough and consistent attitude toward experience by means of reasoning through the relevant orders of meaning that define and guide this experience. And since the assumption of pre-established meaning, or tradition as MacIntyre calls it, is necessary to all practice, the assumption of philosophical traditions give special definition and direction to the activity of philosophizing. As a developing stock of related ideas, a philosophical tradition provides essential assumptions about the nature of reality and of human existence within this reality. It also specifies what and how things can be known in the human experience, what is of value to this experience, and what critical distinctions to be made and what concepts to be employed in working out problems that impinge upon human beings. As Randall suggests, "A philosophical tradition is a

kind of toolbox, a set of instruments a philosopher has at his disposal, in working on his own problems."[5] For example, at least since Friedrich Ast and Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early 1800s, philosophers have viewed language as the primary means by which human beings represent their experiences and thus their problems. As a way to clarify and resolve these problems, the analysis of language has become a significant philosophical approach. In the analytic tradition, linguistic analysis stands as the cornerstone of all philosophic method; in the phenomenological tradition, linguistic analysis serves as a necessary but not sufficient way into the meaning of the life-world.

The analytic tradition began with the assumption that a language completely harbors all of the objective meaning available to human beings for possible use. Since language predates any one human being and since the acquisition of language is necessary to having a meaningful world in the first place, the analytic tradition maintained that language, existing outside of human creation, guides human behavior and structures human reality. Thus, according to this tradition, reality and existence are reducible to linguistic signs. Problems, then, that befall human beings are results of the misuse and misunderstanding of the ideal language in ordinary, everyday discourse. Therefore, Ideal Language philosophers of the analytic tradition attempted to distinguish the immutable truth-bearing formal language from its parochial and unenlightened employment in everyday experience. Thus, their analytic method entailed clarifying and resolving the point at which ordinary language failed to correspond with the formal units of meaning making up the ideal language. This meant transcribing ordinary language into its formal atoms until the correspondence fell short and replacing the problematic parts of ordinary language with formal logical equivalents. The "reductive analysis," "sketches," and "mappings" characteristic of the analytic tradition, undergirded by the old metaphysical assumption of two-worlds, provided a tradition of meaning by which future linguistic philosophers learned to identify philosophical problems as distinct linguistic problems and that served these philosophers with a specific standard to improve their practice.[6]

The history of the phenomenological tradition points up the idea that not only does a tradition provide a specific framework of meaning but yields specific philosophical problems with its own assumptions that force philosophers to think about their own practice of thinking itself. From the assumption that language is prior to an individual having a world and thus structures human experience into meaningful patterns, Wilhelm Dilthey extended the notion of language as linguistic signs to include all non-verbal human action, or all "life-expressions," as Dilthey called them. He recognized that individuals do not act merely according to formal universal patterns of transcendent meaning, as Schleiermacher's metaphysics would have it. According to Dilthey, human beings are capable of employing shared patterns of meaning in novel ways in order to meet the particular demands imposed upon them by newly developing circumstances in specific socio-historical contexts. The problems faced in mustering this response, however, often were not manifested in

the form of linguistic signs. The analysis of life-expressions, Dilthey maintained, would allow him to locate the specific point at which the silent powers of human creativity (subjectivity) meet the transcendent orders of universal meaning (objectivity). In turn, Dilthey assumed that this analysis would do two things. First, it would help clarify and resolve particular everyday human problems. Second, it would make known explicitly the transcendent orders of meaning that gradually culminated through time into the absolute truth through the dialectical friction of these everyday human problems. Thus, Dilthey modified Schleiermacher's metaphysical realism into his own dialectical idealism, providing Edmund Husserl with a philosophical starting point and the necessary concepts for his development of the phenomenological method.

Set to wonder after the loss of his son in World War I, and pressed to find a solution to the social defects spurred by the National Socialist onslaught, Husserl employed Dilthey's philosophical toolbag in his own attempt to make philosophy rigorously responsive to concrete social problems.[7] While aware of the problem of historism in Dilthey's philosophical method, Husserl made use of Dilthey's notion of life-expression in forging the phenomenological method. Similar to Dilthey, Husserl wanted to penetrate human consciousness in order to reveal the pure essences of meaning unadulterated by the social and historical conditioning of human cognition. He extended Dilthey's analysis of life-expression into the phenomenological reduction whereby the philosopher "brackets" or questions the world-stuff toward which human consciousness directs its intentions. Through a series of descriptive steps, the philosopher reduces any given aspect of everyday thought to its pure conceptual meaning, thus leaving bare the essentials of meaning universally shared. Questioning his own interpretive framework throughout his analysis, the philosopher avoids the problem of historism. However, Husserl left unquestioned the assumption that the philosopher can transcend his own particularly conditioned stock of meaning in his attempt to interpret pure objective meaning. His phenomenological method floundered, like Dilthey's and Schleiermacher's before him, in the problem of historism, yielding in turn a tradition of thought perplexed by a philosophical problem that Martin Heidegger was to solve in his development of fundamental ontology.

Juxtaposing, then, the analytic and phenomenological traditions underscores an important methodological aspect that is characteristic of all philosophical investigation. Despite the differences in metaphysical assumptions, in ways of defining and taking on human experience in terms of its problems, all philosophical thought works to clarify the empirical details of this experience by describing, analyzing, and criticizing the assumed meaning by which human beings understand and act toward these details. This critical function of thought cuts through the irrelevant ideas that muddle an adequate understanding of human experience. It illuminates the logical inconsistencies between those ideas that lend significance to human interaction and the troubling new experiences that confound such interaction.

The philosophical method, however, has yet another necessary function:

synthesis and suggestion. In its synthetic form, philosophical thought modifies the traditional stock of wisdom at hand to incorporate these new experiences into a more inclusive vision for action. That is, synthetic thought rearranges the significant relations comprising inherited knowledge in order to make the prevailing qualities of novel experiences fit within the mood and direction of this framework. In this sense, then, philosophizing not only brings the once cloudy experiences to intelligible sense and understanding within a given tradition of meaning but makes explicit the implications and possibilities that this new vision has for further human experience in general. Therefore, philosophic vision can be likened to poetic vision in that both serve as metaphors in refining the human response to the ever-changing pulse of experience. As Randall suggests about the common thread underlying all philosophic traditions, "In these many diverse forms, this enterprise is trying to rectify the inadequacies and limitations of our highly selective schemes of understanding, of our inherited intellectual assumptions, of our narrow and rigid linguistic categories, whose conflicts have generated so many purely dialectical problems and dilemmas."[8]

A question remains, however. How is a philosopher to tell if he has completed the task in setting things right? In other words, what does it mean to say that philosophy aims at a more thorough and consistent attitude toward experience, and what are the marks that let him know that he has attained that standard?

Insofar as the philosopher begins his work with a problem and to the extent that a problem implies uncertainty for the future, then it can be said that the philosopher completes his task when this uncertainty is expelled. According to William James, the greatest practical mark of a philosopher's sufficiency is his bringing about relief and pleasure from puzzle and perplexity. As James puts it, "This feeling of the sufficiency of the present moment, of its absoluteness,—this absence of all need to explain it, account for it, or justify it,—is what I call the Sentiment of Rationality."[9] Now, rationality or reason, composed of analysis and synthesis, strives toward what James calls the rivaling sister passions—clearness and simplicity.[10] What James means here by "rivaling" is that analysis aims to clarify a blurred experience by breaking it down into its meaningful parts and that synthesis aims to gather up these diverse parts into a unified, qualitative whole. Analysis aims toward clarity in perceiving and distinguishing an unanalyzed whole, while synthesis aims at fluency and unity in simplifying these abstracted parts to fit together according to a common quality.

However, the analysis of concrete parts without an eye toward contextual unity will lead to very little response at all. In turn, an attempted adjustment of response through synthesis without a focused analysis will lead to aimless action that fails to get at the heart of the problem. To be more precise, then, the practice of philosophizing strives toward the perfect balance between clearness and simplicity. It is a balance between a thorough analysis of a problematic experience and a consistent integration of the discrepant details within this experience such that the custom of meaning defining such experience continues and flourishes. As James says it, "The passion for parsimony, for economy in thought, is the philosophic passion par excellence."[11]

According to MacIntyre, the proper goal of human experience, the telos of human life, is the quest for the good life, that is a more principled and constant life. If MacIntyre is right, then the quest of philosophy becomes the illumination of what the good life means and how to go about achieving it. As MacIntyre suggests, "It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood."[12] Thus, the practice of philosophizing, called to reason by life's impeding episodes, is the thinking of human experience transcending itself toward a more insightful and universal vision for human experience.

Notes

[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, second edition, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984): 187.

[2] John Herman Randall, Jr., *How Philosophy Uses Its Past*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963): 19.

[3] As James puts it, "If we take the whole history of philosophy, the systems reduce themselves to a few main types which, under all the technical verbiage in which the ingenious intellect of man envelopes them, are just so many visions, modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one's total character and experience, and on the whole preferred—there is no other truthful word—as one's best working attitude" [*A Pluralistic Universe*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977): 14-15].

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale, introduced by J. P. Stern, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 62.

[5] Randall, *How Philosophy Uses Its Past*, 55.

[6] For a more indepth look at the history of analytic philosophy, including the development of its problems, methods, and concepts, see Richard Rorty's *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967,1992: 1-39).

[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, translated and edited by David E. Linge, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976): 130-181.

[8] Randall, *How Philosophy Uses Its Past*, 98.

[9] William James, *The Will To Believe*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1897, 1956): 64.

[10] James points out that "analysis and synthesis are thus incessantly alternating mental activities, a stroke of the one preparing the way for a stroke of the other, much as, in walking, a man's two legs are alternately brought into use, both being indispensable for any orderly advance," [*Psychology: The Briefer Course*, edited by Gordon Allport, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1892, 1985): 120]. In *The Will To Believe* James says further, "But alongside of this passion for simplification there exists a sister passion, which in some minds—though they perhaps form the minority—is its rival. This is the passion for distinguishing; it is the impulse to be acquainted with the parts rather than to comprehend the whole...Clearness and simplicity thus set up rival claims, and make a real dilemma for the thinker," (p.66).

[11] James, *The Will To Believe*, 65.

[12] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 219.

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